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The love of the beloved

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In this paper I investigate the understanding of *eros* expressed in the speeches of Phaedrus and Agathon in Plato's *Symposium*, two speeches often neglected in the literature. I argue that they contain crucial insights about the nature of *eros* that reappear in Diotima's speech. Finally, I consider the relation of Socrates and Alcibiades in light of these insights, arguing that the figure of Alcibiades should be seen as a negative illustration of the notion of erotic education described by Diotima.

„Was tun Sie“, wurde Herr K. gefragt, „wenn Sie einen Menschen lieben?“
„Ich mache einen Entwurf von ihm“, sagte Herr K., „und Sorge, daß er ihm ähnlich wird.“
„Wer? Der Entwurf?“
„Nein“, sagte Herr K., „der Mensch.“
Bertolt Brecht

Introduction

Was Socrates a bad, or even sterile, lover? Did Plato want us to see this? Was this perhaps his indirect criticism of his great teacher? Such is the accusation brought forward against Socrates by a number of prominent interpreters of the *Symposium*.¹ The heartfelt speech delivered by the drunken Alcibiades at the end of the *Symposium* tells us the truth about Socrates, they claim, and that truth paints a less than flattering picture of Plato's self-proclaimed master of erotics.

This paper will examine this accusation. Rather than beginning with an analysis of

Alcibiades' speech, however, or of the portrait it gives us of Socrates, I will take the more indirect route of investigating the speeches of Phaedrus and Agathon. As I will argue, what they say about *eros* sheds an interesting light on the account of *eros* given by Diotima and hence on the figure of Alcibiades as a beloved. We will thus begin by looking at the speeches of Phaedrus and Agathon, but will interpret both of them with continued reference to Socrates and Alcibiades. Having analysed the views of *eros* expressed in these two speeches, we shall proceed to a brief comparison with the view of the relation between lover and beloved that

emerges from the speech of Diotima. Finally, we will take all of this as a background against which to evaluate Alcibiades' accusation that Socrates was never really in love with him.

The setting: lovers and beloved

The *Symposium* is, in contrast to other Platonic dialogues, hardly a dialogue. It consists of six or, if we count Alcibiades' "praise" of Socrates among the love speeches, seven distinct speeches on *eros*, bound into a whole by the fact that the speeches, and the nightly feast at which they were delivered, is recalled and recounted by Apollodorus who in turn has his information from a certain Aristodemus. Both Apollodorus and Aristodemus are followers – or, better – lovers of Socrates. Accordingly, the entire *Symposium* could be regarded as a single speech on *eros*, on love, namely the love of Socrates. The *Symposium* is, like its companion piece the *Phaedo*, a work of disciples, recalling the words of the master. And, as a lover of Socrates, Apollodorus, the first speaker of the *Symposium*, mirrors the last speaker, Alcibiades. Both the beginning and the end of this work on love place Socrates firmly at the centre of the discussion of the nature of *eros*.²

The speeches on *eros*, which make up the bulk of the *Symposium*, present us with different perspectives on the phenomenon of love, perspectives that seem determined by each speaker's relation to *eros*. The basic relation of love in accordance with which the notion of *eros* is analysed in the *Symposium*, is the paiderastic relation between lover and beloved, *erastês* and *erômenos*, an asymmetrical relation through which the beloved is supposedly meant to become virtuous whereas the lover obtains sexual gratifica-

tion. Hence the dialogue invites us to reflect on the status of the different speakers. Are they lovers, beloved, both, or neither lovers nor beloved? Agathon and Pausanias are the participants easiest to identify in this regard. When Agathon was younger, Pausanias was, without a doubt, Agathon's lover, and Agathon was Pausanias' beloved; the way the two are depicted in the *Symposium* suggests that they are still related to each other as lover and beloved.³ It also seems safe to say that Phaedrus and Eryximachus are portrayed, and portray themselves, as a love-couple, with Phaedrus playing the role of the beloved, Eryximachus the role of the lover.⁴ We thus have, tentatively, two lovers, Pausanias and Eryximachus, and two beloved, Phaedrus and Agathon. But when we come to Aristophanes and Socrates, matters are more complicated. Aristophanes has no erotic relation to any of the other symposiasts, but he has what could be called a professional relation to both Agathon and Socrates, in so far as both are objects of satire in his comedies, Agathon because of his position as effeminate beloved, Socrates because of his unhealthy love of wisdom. Socrates also has no direct erotic relation to any of the invited guests at the dinner party, but he has such a relation to its two uninvited guests, Aristodemus, who loves Socrates (cf. 173b3–4) and Alcibiades, whose complicated relation to Socrates we will look at more closely at the end of the paper.

In sum, there are two speeches on love delivered by lovers, two delivered by beloveds, one delivered by a man who seems to be neither lover nor beloved, but rather one who loves to make fun of lovers in his plays, and finally a speech by a man who claims to be a lover, but is in fact revealed as a beloved. And then we must not forget the final

speech of Alcibiades, the supreme beloved who was transformed into a lover, much against his will, when he met Socrates.⁵ If Platonic dialogues can rightfully be said to investigate abstract matters by portraying particular people who claim to have a special understanding of the subject matter discussed in the dialogue, we see that the *Symposium* is no exception. All the guests at Agathon's party have a special interest in the nature of *eros* – as Socrates claims (177d6–e3), none of the dinner guests will cast their vote against Eryximachus' proposal that they should spend the evening praising *eros*.

Eros according to Phaedrus

But let us turn to the father of the *logos* (177d5), Phaedrus. How does he perceive *eros*? His speech is commonly taken to be the least interesting, the one representing the lowest level on the ladder of love, as it were.⁶ Moreover, as a beloved who seems to focus primarily on the benefits one may gain from relations of love or rather, from having a good lover, he has been seen as a representative of technical reasoning, of the calculating use of reason.⁷ Like his lover Eryximachus, who is a proponent of the art of medicine (*iatrikê technê*), he is, then, seen as a spokesman for technical mastery rather than for erotically inspired wisdom. All of this may be true. But this does not mean that Phaedrus has nothing interesting to say about *eros*.

Phaedrus' speech falls into three parts, the first giving a brief account of the nature of *eros* – he is the eldest of the gods (178a7–c2); the second focusing generally on the good things that *eros* causes – he installs shame and ambition in a manner conducive to virtue (178c2–179b3); and the third ex-

plicating these benefits by enumerating three examples of love relations (179b3–180b8).

Phaedrus begins his speech with a mythological account of the nature of *eros*. He is among the oldest of the gods, or simply the oldest, since he has no origin, no parents (178a6–b1). This account may be said to foreshadow Agathon's later demand that one has to define what one talks about before one praises its effects (195a1–3), a demand Socrates repeats (199c3–5).⁸ Apart from this feature, however, the first part of Phaedrus' speech is hardly noteworthy. If anything, it illustrates that Phaedrus is, of all the speakers, the one closest to the poetical tradition.⁹ He, more than anyone, lends voice to tradition, and it is probably no coincidence that he seeks to eulogize *eros* by claiming that he is the oldest, age being the quality bestowing honour according to tradition.

Phaedrus' dependence on tradition and convention at first also seems to come to the fore in the next section of his speech. The blessings he enumerates as following from *eros* are blessings recognized traditionally in Greek poetry as crucial both for the flourishing of the *polis* and for the unfolding of human virtue – shame of performing base actions and ambition for performing noble deeds are praised by Hesiod, Homer and Sophocles alike. What is interesting in Phaedrus' claim that *eros* installs shame and ambition in us, however, is that he links this to the way we appear in the eyes of our lover or beloved. It is because lover as well as beloved is afraid to appear in an unfavourable light in the eyes of the other (178d5–e1) that *eros* can be said to install a drive in human beings for living a beautiful life. The emphasis on the way we appear to others, on our

renown, may of course again seem traditional. Is this not the view of virtue attacked in the second book of Plato's *Republic*, namely that virtuous action is only worthwhile performing when one's reputation depends on it, when one is seen?¹⁰ But before we condemn this element of Phaedrus' speech as a mere repetition of tradition, two things should be noted. First, Alcibiades later claims that Socrates is the only one before whom he has ever felt shame (216b1–2). Does this not indicate that Phaedrus pinpoints a central aspect of how we relate to people we care about when he focuses on shame, an aspect Plato acknowledges?¹¹ The second thing to note is that Phaedrus explicitly connects his notion of caring for one's reputation or renown with the *paiderastic* relation. This is interesting because the way in which he does this shows us that Phaedrus regards the relation as having an educative effect on both lover and beloved: inspired by love, both strive to become better. This goes against the traditional understanding of the *paiderastic* relation, according to which it is a one-way affair as regards the acquisition of virtue. The lover was supposed to possess virtue already, which he should then be able to hand over to the beloved in exchange for sexual favours, a view we will see clearly expressed in Pausanias' speech (cf. 184c4–e4). Thus it was only the *erômenos* who should become virtuous through the erotic relation. According to Phaedrus, however, *both* lover and beloved are led to live beautifully by *eros*.

What he means by this is spelled out in greater detail when he asserts that *eros* makes the lover inspired (*entheos*) in relation to virtue, making him like those that are by nature best (179a7–8). Here he focuses on the lover, a fact that is important. For

in focusing first and foremost on the lover, Phaedrus makes it clear that he is not primarily claiming that it is useful for a beloved to have a virtuous lover, able to make the beloved virtuous as well – which one might believe, considering the general consent that Phaedrus is only interested in the beloved's benefit, most notably his own. What he is claiming here is rather that it is useful for a lover to have a beloved, because that will make the lover transcend his own limited nature and strive towards what is by nature best. This appears to foreshadow Diotima's teaching that man, driven by *eros*, will ultimately assimilate himself to the divine. This alone should make us hesitant to dismiss Phaedrus' speech as unimportant.¹²

However, as has been pointed out by many commentators, the final section of Phaedrus' speech, with its three examples of love relations, seems to show us that his notion of *eros* is not entirely consistent. The problem is as follows: whereas the first two examples, Alcestis and Orpheus, may with some right be said to illustrate – the first positively, the second negatively – his point that *eros* is the best guide to living (and dying) beautifully or honourably, the third example, Achilles, does not seem to do so. The gods bestowed special honour on Achilles, who was willing to die for his lover Patroclus, Phaedrus asserts, *precisely* because Achilles, being a beloved rather than a lover, was not inspired by *eros* the way a lover is (180b3–4).

So apparently Phaedrus claims that godly inspiration or *eros* is what makes men truly virtuous, while he at the same time seems to say that those who become virtuous without godly inspiration are better. Is Phaedrus thus claiming, after all, that the man who is not in the grip of love, the non-lover, as he is

called in the *Phaedrus* (cf. 227c7–8), is better than the lover? Perhaps. Or perhaps he is merely claiming that it is understandable that a lover in a paiderastic relation, who is by Greek convention older than his lover and primarily interested in his physical beauty, should be inspired to perform great deeds, but that it is more impressive when the beloved, the younger man, actually returns the love and is willing to die for the older lover also. If this is so, we can say that Alcestis illustrates how a lover becomes virtuous through *eros*, whereas Achilles illustrates that a beloved may, if not through *eros* then at least through affection, *agapê* (180b2), benefit from the relation, not by receiving virtue from his lover, but through being lifted up by his affection for his lover. If so, Phaedrus really does conceive of *eros* as a symmetrical relation, not because lover and beloved mutually give each other what the other lacks, but because *eros* itself makes both strive to become better.

Eros according to Agathon

But enough about Phaedrus for now. Let us turn to Agathon. What is his relation, as a beloved, to Phaedrus? Apart from the somewhat dubious honour assigned to him by most commentators of having as little philosophical content in his speech as Phaedrus, one might wonder if the two have much in common. In fact Agathon explicitly rejects Phaedrus' understanding of *eros*, by claiming that *eros* is the youngest, and not the oldest, god (195a8). This is indeed important for understanding the teaching his speech contains, and I shall return to it in a moment. Nevertheless, there are a number of striking parallels between Phaedrus and Agathon, which I believe justify seeing the two

under one perspective. First of all, as noted previously, both Phaedrus and Agathon, in contrast to Pausanias and Eryximachus, begin with a genealogical account of *eros*. The birth of *eros* explains the nature of *eros*. Phaedrus and Agathon also share, in contrast to their lovers, the assumption that *eros* is one.¹³ At a deeper level, this reflects that neither of them seems particularly interested in defending the paiderastic love-relation, which may again be due to the fact that they are beloveds. They experience love from the object-side, so to say,¹⁴ they see what happens to people who become inspired by their beauty, and they seem less interested in defending their own erotic position in the manner that for instance Pausanias and Eryximachus do. Finally, and probably connected herewith, both focus on *eros* as a force that grips us and elevates us.

These features unite both accounts with the teaching of Diotima. But let us take a closer look at Agathon's speech. We can divide it as follows:¹⁵ the first part, by far the largest, elaborates Agathon's understanding of the god. According to Agathon, *eros* is the happiest or most blessed of the gods, and he is so because of his beauty, on the one hand, and because of the fact that he is best, on the other (195a5–7). Agathon accordingly explicates the beauty of *eros* first (195a7–196b3) and then goes on to explain why *eros* is best, by ascribing to him the four cardinal virtues: justice, moderation, courage, and wisdom (196b4–196d6). In the second part of his speech (196d7–197c3), Agathon then elaborates the benefits we receive from this god of youth and beauty by focusing on the effect the wisdom of *eros* has on those who are touched by the god. In a final part, he reaches the summit of his encomium of *eros* in a poetic *tour de*

force, perhaps devoid of philosophical content, but nevertheless a beautiful piece of rhetorical poetry (197c3–197e5).

Instead of following the structure of Agathon's speech, I will begin by looking at the effects Agathon claims *eros* has, that is, on the second part. He ascribes the main effect *eros* has on us to *eros*' wisdom. *Eros* is, in a word, the greatest, and hence wisest, poet since he makes all that are touched by him poets, handing over his own poetic wisdom to those he comes into contact with. We here see that Agathon's initial joke, that he might become wise if he could just get Socrates to lie next to him (175c7–d2), in fact matches his understanding of *eros* and wisdom. In his view wisdom is handed over to us literally when we come into contact with the wise.¹⁶ As also becomes clear, Agathon here understands wisdom as poetry, and poetry in a fairly wide sense, as production or human achievement, a way of looking at poetry that Diotima will later repeat. Anybody who achieves something out of the ordinary, whether in poetry, the arts, archery, divination etc., is touched by *eros* (196e2–197b3). Therefore Agathon can join Phaedrus in claiming that *eros* is "the fairest and best guide, whom every real man must follow" (197e2–4).

What about the first part of the speech, the one that describes the nature of *eros*? If we focus on the second section of this part (196b4–196d6), the one that ascribes virtue to *eros*, it seems clear that Agathon is not primarily interested in giving an argumentative justification for his view of *eros* as the possessor of all the virtues. Commentators have therefore attacked this section in particular for being based on questionable inferences. But is this a criticism Agathon would himself have found damaging? What,

we may ask, does he attempt to accomplish through his speech? In a recent article, Jörn Müller has plausibly suggested that we should understand Agathon's speech literally as his entry in the contest that he initially claims he and Socrates will have about wisdom (175e7–9). Agathon, in delivering his encomium, wishes to illustrate that he is, in fact, the wisest in matters of erotics. And this he does by delivering a poetically masterful praise of *eros* that claims that poetical mastery is the effect of *eros* on human beings. Following Müller, we may then regard the poetical *tour de force* at the end of Agathon's speech as Agathon's poetic proof that what he says about *eros* is true – *eros* is what makes us wise in poetry – as well as his way of proving that he is touched by *eros* and hence wise. In delivering his encomium, Agathon thus praises the god as well as himself (198a1–3, cf. also 196d7–e2).

Indeed, the vigorous applause his speech receives from all the other symposiasts at first seems to prove him right: not only has he won the poetic contest of yesterday, before 30,000 Greeks. He might seem bound to win the contest regarding wisdom before the more refined audience present at his own party (cf. 194b6–8) – except that Socrates, if he joins in the applause, seems not to do so in earnest. The critical examination of Agathon that follows at the beginning of Socrates' speech shows that Socrates is far from happy with what Agathon has claimed about the nature of *eros*.

So perhaps we should take another look at what Agathon claims about the nature of *eros*, now including the first section of the first part of his speech (195a7–196b3). As I noted, according to Agathon *eros* is the youngest god and as such, *eros* detests the old. If Phaedrus is the defender of tradition,

Agathon is the defender of renewal and of the new. According to Agathon, *eros*, the god of love, overcomes the old Olympian regime of violence and installs love among men and gods, and Agathon could thus be seen as delivering, to follow Gerhard Krüger, a glorifying account of an age that is new, mild, and civilized.¹⁷ If this is correct, one might say that Agathon sees *eros* as the patron god of sophistry, of the new that overthrows tradition. Whether this is something that Socrates will wish to endorse of course depends on a larger question of how Socrates relates to tradition and sophistry. Space will not permit a full consideration of this here,¹⁸ but we may at least focus on Agathon's identification of *eros* as the principle or cause of poetic production.

In stressing this aspect of *eros* Agathon may at first seem to analyse *eros* in accordance with the paiderastic tradition. Agathon claims that all good things come to humans and gods alike from *eros* (197b8–9), and to Luc Brisson this indicates that he identifies *eros* as a lover, an ideal version of Pausanias, who bestows goods on those he loves.¹⁹ However, in fact Agathon identifies the source of all goods as *eros*, since *eros* is love of the beautiful, and all good things are due to this love (197b3–9) and not as a lover who claims to be able to impart virtue to others. This shows that Agathon has at least an ambiguous relation to the tradition of paiderastia. For what he must mean to say is that we do not really need human lovers to obtain the good, since it is our love of the beautiful that leads us to it. Rather than identifying *eros* with an ideal lover, as Brisson would have it, Agathon seems to understand *eros* on the one hand as love of the beautiful, on the other as an image of himself, the beautiful beloved.²⁰ *Eros* is a belov-

ed that bestows goods upon his lovers, and this is an inversion of the traditional paiderastic relation. If this is correct, we may say that Agathon, like Phaedrus, identifies *eros* as a force that is able to make a human being good irrespective of how good his lovers may be. Love is, as it were, a self-generating force. We may wonder whether this view is to Pausanias' liking. More importantly, however, we should ask whether it is to Socrates' liking.

It is easy to suppose that Socrates dislikes all of it. Indeed, he suggests that there is nothing true in Agathon's, or indeed any other speaker's description of *eros* (198d3–199b2). But this is clearly nothing more than a rhetorical exaggeration, since Socrates' speech, which he claims to have heard from the wise Diotima, in fact borrows more than a little from the previous speakers. Moreover, Socrates claims that Agathon spoke beautifully (201c1), and if the beautiful and the good are related, as Socrates will go on to suggest, it is likely that Socrates does, after all, see something good in Agathon's speech. Could this be Agathon's claim that *eros* is a producer of virtue and wisdom? The answer will be yes and no. First of all, we should note a problem with Agathon's understanding of *eros* that sets him apart from Phaedrus. For whereas Phaedrus seems to regard the drive installed in us by *eros* as a universal phenomenon – after all he claims that “there is no one so bad that, once the god Eros has entered him, he would not be directed toward virtue” (179a7–8) – this is emphatically denied by Agathon. *Eros* is only able to affect what is already delicate and harmonious, he cannot transform what is old and harsh, according to Agathon (195e5–7). *Eros* the beautiful only touches the beautifully young, thereby

giving them the good. Or less poetically: possession of youthful beauty is the precondition for the acquisition of the good. We may hope for Pausanias' sake that those commentators who suspect that he is well advanced in age are mistaken.

Agathon thus seems to be claiming two incompatible things. On the one hand he says that love of beauty has the power to bestow virtue upon us, and this allies him with Phaedrus. On the other hand he seems to assume that being beautiful is what makes us good and blessed, thereby denying that *eros* has any real power, since it cannot make the old and ugly better. It is this narcissistic teaching of the young and beautiful Agathon that Socrates attacks most explicitly in the *elenchus* he performs (199b8–201c9) before he proceeds to recount what he learned about *eros* from the wise Diotima.

Socrates' *elenchus* reveals a further problem with Agathon's account of *eros*. For Agathon claims that *eros* is the cause of wisdom and everything good, and further claims that *eros* is our love of the beautiful, while at the same time maintaining that *eros* is what is beautiful. This means that *eros* is both our desire for the beautiful and the object of our desire, the latter explaining why *eros*, in Agathon's description, becomes a mirror image of himself. Agathon's main problem is that he is not able to see what it is we desire, when we desire the beautiful, but seems to confuse the object of our desire with the desire itself.

Whether the *elenchus* is free from questionable inferences may itself be doubted, but at least Socrates gets Agathon to accept the point that *eros* himself is not beautiful – Eros is a desire for beauty, – nor good – since our desire for what is beautiful is also a desire for what is good. *Eros* is in fact the

desire to forever possess the good and the beautiful that we, in contrast with the gods, do not possess, or at least cannot possess in the way they do. For the self-obsessed Agathon, this is a needed lesson.

Diotima, Phaedrus and Agathon

Despite this critique of Agathon, however, we still meet his view of *eros* as a driving force again in the teaching Socrates goes on to report as the teaching of Diotima, and we also find the assumption that this force is the best guide for achieving the good. When I now turn to this teaching, I will not attempt to give a detailed interpretation but I will rather focus on some general aspects that may be regarded as repetitions of, or developments of, thoughts we find in the speeches of Phaedrus and Agathon.

Diotima begins, much as Phaedrus and Agathon have done, by explaining the nature of *eros* through an account of his genesis: he is the offspring of *penia* and *poros*, poverty and resourcefulness (cf. 203b1–204a7). As the child of poverty, *eros* does not possess the beauty he desires (204c4–6). But as a child of resourcefulness he is also a great hunter, who always tries to get hold of the beauty and the good he loves. Somewhat curiously Diotima at this point (204b8–c3) tells Socrates that his previous belief that *eros* is beautiful is understandable, since he has mistakenly identified *eros* with the beloved, with what *eros* is striving for (204c1). But *eros*, she explains, is in fact the lover. What is the point of this remark?

It seems reasonable to infer that Socrates is here delivering a criticism of Agathon, concealed as the teaching of Diotima. He has already made a point out of telling Agathon that he previously held the same view

of *eros* (cf. 201e3–5). And as argued above, Agathon sees *eros* precisely as a beloved, as an idealized version of himself. As I argued, he thereby appears to confuse the object of desire with desire itself, by claiming that the object of desire (the beautiful *eros*) is desire (namely *eros*). Agathon's love thus seems to be self-love. That there *is* a problem in this understanding of *eros* is something Agathon already knows, however, at least implicitly. For he is not altogether blind to the fact that human beings are in need of beauty, and that it is the longing born out of this need that leads us to the good. In fact he has said so explicitly in his speech, as Socrates points out (201a2–6, compare with 197b3–9). This knowledge may be due to the fact that Agathon can see the effect he has on others, as a beautiful object of love.

If these speculations are justified, what Socrates is telling Agathon, by relating his own previous mistake, is that he should reverse his understanding of *eros* by stepping outside of himself, so to speak. If he could look at himself as a lover in love with the beauty he possesses, and forget that he himself is the object of that desire, he would be on his way towards the good. If he could somehow see the beauty reflected in the eyes of his beholder and fall in love with that beauty as a beauty he did not himself possess, he would in fact be on his way up Diotima's ladder of love. For that ladder is structured around our encounter with, and desire for, beauty, beginning with the love of physical beauty.

I will not go into any detail about this "ladder", but merely make three short observations on how it is connected with the speeches of Phaedrus and Agathon. In elaborating the different activities in which human beings engage in order to attain the

limited kind of immortality possible to achieve for us mortals (206e7–8, 208b2–3) Diotima mentions the products that result from love of honour, *philotimia*, presumably as a first indication of what it means to produce psychic, in contrast to physical, offspring (208c2–6). Diotima explains that although love of honour may seem to be irrational it is all the same a form of our love for immortality, namely a love of eternal renown. She then reiterates the exact same examples given earlier by Phaedrus (208d2–7) and claims that we must understand the deeds performed by Alcestis as well as by Achilles as done out of a wish for "an immortal remembering of their virtue, which we now retain" (208d7–8). One could say that the love of honour reveals itself, on closer examination, as a desire to be praised for one's virtue, a point Aristotle will later emphasize (EN 1095b22–30).

Of course, this is not the final step in the ascent to beauty, and in the end Diotima will deny that one acquires real virtue through such acts born of our love of honour – only the contemplation of beauty, she claims, can generate true virtue in us (212a2–5). Nevertheless she seems to regard *philotimia* as a lower form of that desire which, when directed at the highest, turns into *philosophia*, love of wisdom (210d6). In this way, Phaedrus' old-fashioned understanding of *eros*, as related to one's honour or renown, is partly vindicated by Diotima. This, however, will not be the last word on the complicated notion of *philotimia* we find in the *Symposium*.

Secondly, Phaedrus' notion that *eros* is connected with seeing and being seen is, at least partly, reflected in Diotima's final description of the way the lover, moving up to the perfect revelation of beauty, relates to his beloved. When the lover has learned that

beauty of soul is more honourable than bodily beauty (210b6–7) he has to seek, Diotima claims, through speeches and arguments inspired by the beauty of his beloved, to teach and educate him in order that he, too, may come “to behold the beautiful in pursuits and laws, and to see that all this is akin to itself, so that he may come to believe that the beauty of the body is something trivial” (210c3–6). We thus see something of the symmetrical notion of love expounded by Phaedrus at play here, although what Diotima says is much more complex than Phaedrus’ simple claim that the lover and beloved alike will pursue virtue when either is looked upon by the other. For what Diotima suggests is that the lover will become pregnant with virtue through looking at his beloved, and that he will then be able, through this effect of beauty, to produce speeches that will turn the beloved, much as he himself has been turned, towards a higher beauty than the beauty of the beloved that initiated the process (cf. 209c2–7). Ideally, the lover will, through his love, transform his beloved into a lover also, a lover of the beauty that transcends lover as well as beloved.

This is, as emphasized by Luc Brisson,²¹ a reversal of the traditional paiderastic ideal of education. For in Diotima’s peculiar language of birth and pregnancy, it is the lover who, in meeting the beautiful, becomes pregnant and gives birth to virtue (209c2–3). Where traditional paiderastia suggests that the lover gets the beauty, through sexual gratification, whereas the beloved gets the good, through education, Diotima suggests, in Seth Benardete’s words, that “the lover gets the good and the beloved keeps the beautiful”.²² Diotima sees the beloved as a stepping stone for the lover in becoming vir-

tuous, and seems to suggest that the lover’s ability to help the beloved to become virtuous is a by-product. All the same, Diotima’s teaching is, as she herself points out, a defence of a special type of paiderastic love (see 211b5–6) since the lover, in gaining the good, will seek to make his beloved participate in that good as well.

A final point that connects Socrates with Agathon: If it is true that Agathon claims that *eros* is like himself, a beautiful beloved, Socrates counters by claiming that love is in fact like Socrates himself, ugly and needy.²³ Agathon is not love but the object of love, and Socrates his lover. The two thus seem to make a fine pair. That they should become that pair is, according to Socrates, what Alcibiades, through his drunken speech, seeks to prevent (cf. 222c7–e3). So let us now turn to that speech, with a view to our initial question whether Socrates was a bad lover.

Alcibiades

A detailed interpretation of Alcibiades’ encomium is here unnecessary. It will be sufficient to make some observations on his description of the failed attempt to seduce Socrates. What is clear about this self-revealing description is that Alcibiades at first conceived of his relation to Socrates in terms of traditional paiderastia. Trusting in his own youthful beauty, he hoped to secure the good from Socrates in a manner that parallels Agathon’s initial joke that he might become wise by lying next to Socrates. By lying, not next to, but with Socrates, he hoped to become educated, to become virtuous. But this, as he soon learned, was not to happen. Socrates did not care for his beauty at all, which to Alcibiades means that Socrates is in fact indifferent to human beauty

(216d6–e2). It would perhaps have been better for Alcibiades if he had hooked up with Pausanias. He would gladly have told him that he could make him better while giving him what Alcibiades really seemed to want – sexual intercourse (cf. 219b3–d2).

Apart from the question whether Socrates was in fact defective in respect of human beauty, let us ask what Alcibiades hoped to learn from Socrates. Before he relates the seduction-story, he informs the other Symposiasts that none of them have seen the inner beauty of Socrates, but that he has. Socrates, he claims, is like a satyr: he pretends to be ignorant and wraps this appearance around himself in order to conceal the inner virtue of *sophrosynê* (216d3–7). But this is surely a Platonic joke: What Alcibiades fails to see is that the outer appearance is the same as the inner beauty. Socrates' ignorance is his moderation. And Socrates tells him that (219a1–4). So what could Alcibiades possibly hope to learn from Socrates? Ignorance? Or moderation? Then he would have to accept to be refuted by Socrates and to learn to give up his care for the political as long as he had not cared first for himself. And this, Alcibiades is frank enough to tell us, he could not do (216a6–b5): his love for the honour shown to him by the multitude has made it impossible for him to listen to Socrates. Instead he runs away with his ears closed in order to stop the tears from swelling up in his eyes (215e1–3, 216a2–4). His *philotimia*, it seems, stands in the way of *philosophia*. No one said it was easy to climb up Diotima's ladder of love. And this, it seems, is the deeper point of Alcibiades' failed attempt to seduce Socrates. The true failure is that Socrates could not seduce Alcibiades, could not turn him into a lover of wisdom.

So, to return to our initial question: was Socrates a bad lover? First of all, the answer to this question depends on what we understand by being a bad lover. If one means that Socrates was a bad lover because he did not really fall in love with Alcibiades and did not seek to educate him as his beloved, the answer might be yes. But then Socrates would be happy to be characterized as a bad lover, since he would claim that no one is able to pass on virtue to another in the way the ideal of the traditional paiderastic relation envisages. If, however, one means that Socrates was a bad lover because he failed to turn his relation with Alcibiades into the relation between lover and beloved described by Diotima, things become more complicated.

As mentioned above, Diotima claims that the lover should become pregnant with virtue through his love of the beloved, and should, as a result, generate beautiful speeches about virtue in order to educate his beloved (209b5–c7, 210c1–6). Since part of the ladder of love depicted by Diotima consists in learning that bodily as well as psychic beauty is nothing compared to the beauty of ways of living and of laws (*epitêdeumata kai nomoi*, 210c3–4), while they in turn are only steps on the way to the vision of true beauty, it seems fair to say that the ideal paiderastic relation would be one where the lover, through his love of the beloved, would transform the beloved into a lover, not of himself, but of the things higher than himself, first ways of life and laws, then types of knowledge, then of beauty itself (cf. 210c6–e1). Thereby his beloved would, in coming to love the beautiful, become truly virtuous through the effect of beauty. So the real question is whether Socrates was able to transform Alcibiades into a lover, not a lover of Socrates, the man, but a

lover of that which Socrates is himself a lover, virtue and beauty.

In fact, Alcibiades' speech suggests that Socrates did convert Alcibiades. Instead of being the beloved, he was transformed into a lover (cf. 217c7–8, 222b3–4). But it seems that he became the lover of Socrates, rather than of virtue. Apparently, Socrates' seduction of Alcibiades through his beautiful speeches, which Alcibiades likens to the music made by Marsyas (215b8–d1), did not reach the deepest level of Alcibiades' soul. Did he fail because he could not generate the effect of the philosophical *eros* that he himself has heard Diotima describe?

This is of course possible. Socrates would then, it appears, be defective in the use of *logos*. His use of discourse, his mastery of dialectic, would be flawed in so far as it lacked the ability to lead, or seduce, souls properly, an ability that Socrates himself praises as a major aspect of the competence of using dialectic in the *Phaedrus* (261a7–8, 271c10–d2). On the other hand, Alcibiades' self-revealing account of his relation to Socrates seems to suggest that it is he, rather than Socrates, who is defective. Alcibiades claims that he has been 'stung' by Socrates' discourses (218a2–5), presumably because these discourses have made him realize that he should give up his political ambition, in order to care for his soul (216a4–6, cf. *Apol.* 29d7–e3). All the same, he is not able to live the examined life Socrates recommends precisely because he is more in love with honour, with political ambition, than with wisdom.

If this is the real reason why Socrates could not turn Alcibiades into a true lover, a lover of beauty and wisdom, the *Symposium* gives us a rather ambiguous picture of the love of honour. On the one hand, the speech of Phaedrus, as well as the speech of Diotima, points out that love of honour can be a motivational force that leads us towards virtue. The wish to be honoured for virtue is itself honourable, since it makes us imitate what is better than ourselves. On the other hand, the comical appearance of the drunken Alcibiades at the end of the banquet shows us how dangerous love of honour is. Agathon rightly pointed out that *eros*, as a desire for beauty, is a force that moves us in the direction of the good, but he misunderstood the object of that desire, so that his love became self-love, a self-love that is perhaps most notably expressed in his desire for the applause his beautiful poetry receives. In a like manner, Alcibiades seems to have understood that his own love of Socrates is a motivational force that moves him towards the good but all the same he misunderstands the object of this desire, first of all because he believes that it is Socrates, rather than philosophy, he should love, secondly because what love he may have of wisdom is not strong enough to overcome his love of the applause from the Athenian public. Like Agathon, he prefers to remain a beloved, rather than to turn into a true lover. The drunken, comical Alcibiades may thus also be regarded as a figure of tragedy: His love of honour is the tragic flaw that prevents him from becoming what Socrates had hoped he could be.

Notes

- 1 Most explicitly by S. Rosen, *Plato's Symposium*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1968 [2nd ed. 1987], who in this regard (cf. 278–279) follows S. Kierkegaard, *Om Begrebet Ironi* in *Søren Kierkegaards Skrifter 1*, København: G.E.C Gads Forlag 1995 (see in particular 102–113). See also M. Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986, 185–191 and, in particular 195–198 and D. Hyland, *Plato and the Question of Beauty*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008, 60–63.
- 2 Cf. Nussbaum, 1986, 168, who sees “the dialogue as a whole” as “the speech of Alcibiades rather than of Socrates”. See also S. Benardete, “On Plato's *Symposium*” in *Plato's Symposium*, translation by S. Benardete with commentaries by A. Bloom and S. Benardete, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2001, 181.
- 3 The relation may have evolved into a more symmetrical homosexual relation between two grown-up men, a kind of relationship which according to some scholars had become more socially acceptable at the end of the fifth century than they had traditionally been, cf. S. Scully, *Plato's Phaedrus*, Translation with notes, glossary, appendices, Interpretative Essay and Introduction, Focus Philosophical Library: Newburyport, 2003, 7.
- 4 The relation between Phaedrus and Eryximachus is less certain than the relation between Agathon and Pausanias. They are certainly close friends, which we see from the *Protagoras* and the *Phaedrus*, as well as from the *Symposium*. Are they lovers? Perhaps. At least, Phaedrus talks about Eryximachus at the beginning of the *Symposium* in a manner that – playfully or earnestly – casts him in the role of Phaedrus' older lover (176d5–7). Moreover, Eryximachus' speech, like the speech of Pausanias, certainly presents the view of a lover, whereas Phaedrus' specific interest in Lysias' treatment of the notion of love, as we find it in the dialogue named after him, the *Phaedrus*, indicates that Phaedrus sees himself in the role of the beloved.
- 5 Cf. R.E. Allen, *The Symposium*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990, 7.
- 6 Cf. S. Rosen (1968), 35 and Pietsch, “Die Rede des Phaidros (178a6–180b8)” in *Platon. Symposium*, hrsg. Christoph Horn, Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2012, 35.
- 7 Cf. S. Rosen (1968), 50, and C. Griswold, *Self-Knowledge in Plato's Phaedrus*, University Park, Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996, 20.
- 8 Cf. Pietsch (2012), 40
- 9 Cf. G. Krüger, *Einsicht und Leidenschaft*, Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1983 [1939], 92–94.
- 10 So S. Rosen (1968), 50–52.
- 11 Cf. M. Nussbaum (1986), 189.
- 12 S. Rosen (1968), 35, thus rightly asserts that Plato, through Phaedrus “exhibits one of the fundamental principles of his teaching: The highest is already visible in the lowest or most common.” It is therefore somewhat puzzling that Rosen fails to see anything positive in Phaedrus' claim that *eros* is able to make lesser people better, cf. Rosen (1968), 53. For a more positive evaluation of this claim, see K. Corrigan and E. Glazov-Corrigan, *Plato's Dialectic at Play*, University Park, Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2004, 53.
- 13 Cf. L. Brisson, “Agathon, Pausanias, and Diotima in Plato's *Symposium*” in *Plato's Symposium – Issues in Interpretation and Reception*, ed. J. Leshner, D. Nails and F. Sheffield, Washington DC, Center for Hellenic Studies, 2006, 239.
- 14 Rosen (1968), 51 and 166–169, thus sees a similarity between the two in their narcissistic understanding of Eros.
- 15 I here follow J. Müller, “Die Wettstreit über die Weisheit zwischen Poesie und Philosophie: Agathons Rede und ihre Prüfung durch Sokrates (193e–201c)” in *Platon. Symposium*, hrsg. Christoph Horn, Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2012, 105–123.
- 16 Although Agathon's initial joke, that he may become wise by sitting next to Socrates, seems to go against the ideal of education elaborated by Socrates in the *Republic*, according to which you cannot hand over wisdom the way you can educate someone in a *technê* (cf. *Rep.* 518b7–c2), we should note that Agathon's insistence that wisdom is the result of touching the wise (i.e. *eros*) seems to mirror the view of wisdom we find in both the *Phaedo* and the *Republic*, according to which wisdom results from the philosopher's touching the ideas (cf. *Phaed.*, 68b8–69c7, 79d1–7, 80d5–e1 and *Rep.* 500b8–e3, 540a8–b1). This view is also Diotima's final view of wisdom as can be seen from 212a2–5. Having said this, one

should of course note that what Diotima and what Agathon understand by wisdom is not the same. For Agathon, wisdom is mastery in poetry, for Diotima, it is the knowledge obtained through philosophy.

¹⁷ Krüger (1939), 136.

¹⁸ See the paper by Ågotnes, in this volume pp. 59

¹⁹ Brisson (2006), 245.

²⁰ Brisson also states that Agathon presents *eros* as having the attributes “that he himself so obvious-

ly possesses” but claims that “we may suppose him to attribute the qualities of character and intellect, as distinct from the advantages given by age and beauty, to this relationship with Pausanias”, Brisson (2006), 245. It is doubtful whether we may suppose this to be the case.

²¹ Brisson (2006), 246.

²² Benardete (2001), 182.

²³ Cf. Benardete (2001), 190 and 193–94.